

Un “hombre fatal” desnudo para matar: estética y política del criminal queer en *El desconocido del lago*, de Alain Guiraudie

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Palabras clave

“estudios queer”; “cine queer”; “criminal queer”;
“El desconocido del lago”

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Resumen

El artículo interroga la figura del criminal queer en el cine, buscando ubicarlo políticamente como un sujeto que produce desplazamientos en los proyectos igualitarios y asimilacionistas del contemporáneo a través de la celebración de la negatividad, de el desorden, de lo extrañamiento, de la pulsión de muerte y de una ética anti-comunidad. El movimiento del trabajo es acercar la idea de criminalidad queer a un léxico ampliado de

la vertiente negativa de los estudios queer, discutiendo menos el acto criminal en su materialidad real, y más su apariencia, a menudo injustificable en las narrativas de las películas mismas, como un recurso estético capaz de producir una cierta reflexión política. Para este ejercicio, movilizamos la película *El desconocido del lago* (2013), de Alain Guiraudie, cuyo protagonista encarna a un “hombre fatal” que perturba el onírico paisaje estival de un lago europeo, cometiendo asesinatos y fracturando la lógica comunitaria que existe entre los homosexuales frequentadores del lugar.

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A “homme fatal” stripped to kill: aesthetics and politics of the queer criminal in *Stranger by the lake*, by Alain Guiraudie

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“*A stranger by the lake*”

Summary

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the idea of queer criminality to an extended lexicon arising from the negative perspective of queer studies, discussing not exactly the criminal act in its actual materiality but more its emergence as an aesthetic resource that is able to deliver certain political pensiveness, even if the criminal act is often unjustifiable in the narratives of the films themselves. For such, we resorted to the film *Stranger by the Lake* (2013), by Alain Guiraudie, in which the protagonist personifies a “homme fatal” who disturbs the oneiric summer landscape by an European lake, committing murders and fracturing the local communitarian logic between gay men who hang out at the site.

Abstract

The article investigates the figure of the queer criminal in the cinema, placing it politically as an individual who produces displacements in egalitarian and assimilationist projects that are in force in the contemporary, by celebrating negativity, disorder, defamiliarization, death drive and an anti-communitarian ethics. The purpose of the paper is to approximate

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1. Introduction

With fanatical care, “jealous care,” I prepared for my adventure as one arranges a couch
or a room for love: I was hot for crime.

Jean Genet in *The Thief’s Journal* (1949)

A 25-minute short film produced in 1950 - the sole film of its director - and released only in 1975, due to sanctions imposed due to its homoerotic content, bequeathed to the cinema one of its most radical experiences of beauty and freedom. In *Song of love* (*Un chant d’amour*), Jean Genet stages the relationship between men that are imprisoned and share an intimacy restricted by the cell walls that keep them apart; however, they are not able to cripple those bodies that dance, masturbate, dream and smoke together, albeit they are in distinct spaces inside a prison. Genet fabulates bodies which are incarcerated, but free in the field of fantasy and performance, paving the way for the figure of the queer criminal as an aesthetic exit in response to moral panic.

Prisoners are monitored by a voyeur jailer who restrains his desire by acting violently against those he looks at, and voyeurism is shown in the film as a politics of emergence of the suppressed desire: physical encounters between incarcerated men are materialized only in the imagination of the jailer, that is, they can only exist in the image, triggered as a projection of a character who fancies what is not allowed to live and be. There is no diegetic justification for the arrests and in most cases the types of crimes those people committed are unknown. Nevertheless, a plate on the door of one of the cells allows us to know that one of these men is incarcerated for murder. If we take the film and book *The Thief’s Journal* (1949) as supplementary works, we find in Genet a poetic that portrays the prison as a space where gay men share a horizon of complicity by politically embracing the idea of an abject existence –in 1930’s Europe– that was linked to the crimes they committed, as well as their queerness.

The reverence to Genet with the article epigraph, as well as the retake of *Song of love*, not only show the inaugural character of his work, but also aim to position the interest of this research: the investigation of a certain type of queer criminal in the cinema, particularly in the 21st century works, where it is not relevant that motivations of crimes are justified, and for which there is not either moral value diegetically linked to their actions, and that allow to think about the types of politics that are produced in the field of cinema outside the scope of “positive representations” and an agenda of assimilationist rights, as we will argue throughout this article.

In previous critical-speculative exercises (Almeida and Marconi, 2022; Marconi and Almei-

da, 2022), we proposed a displacement in relation to hegemonic forms of political claims that reflect on many social spheres, including artistic and cultural productions. Such requirements and adhesions, usually translated under terms such as “representativeness,” seem to understand that art is about, primarily, a mechanism or strategic form of representation that is able to change its surrounding reality, if bound to strategies of activism organized around egalitarian agendas or targeted at action and social change, as Jane Gaines (1999) explains in *Political mimesis*. For that reason, positioned at this “militant axis” (Casetti, 2005), certain claims that are aimed at artistic productions generally stall the idea of representation and representativeness at the level of entrenchment and dichotomic approval of what positive and negative representations and representativeness of LGBT population would be. And those, when not reverberating in aesthetic interdictions that are more direct against what would be “detrimental” to the image of that social group, they also seem to us little open to art politics (Rancière, 2018), to reparative gestures (Sedgwick, 2020) and to amoral experiences with certain cultural objects.

First and foremost, we consider important to point out that our critique is not a judicious judgment against the idea of representation, as we adopt a constructive perspective of representation processes whereby we know that things have no meaning in themselves, but when we build a sense for them using representational systems (concepts, signs, language, discourse, etc.). Nevertheless, what can be observed in some activist or militant practices, in special when they analyze representations in artistic and media products, is the degradation of their own constructive perspective which, often, they claim to use to understand not only gendering and racialization processes of individuals, but also the complexity of forms of social, political and media representations.

We clearly understand that militant practices react critically to power relations, which, over time, influenced the production of representations based on ostensible and violent stereotype against minority groups and, which, in case of people dissident in gender and sexuality, placed queer as a deviation. Nonetheless, our effort follows two directions: to seek to understand conscious appropriations of deviation such as queer politics practice, and to refuse certain moralization that can be noted, both in arts and critics, and that impacts the construction of individuals who are classified in minority groups as conduct role models and that we consider little productive.

As we are aware of that, we would like to build a critique not necessarily intended for pointing out problems in an art interested in building LGBT characters in hegemonic fashion under the aegis of an edifying, suffering, heroic or egalitarian layer, bearing in mind that such critique has already been developed elsewhere by one of the persons writing this paper. Much less we would like to reinforce the myth of the queer criminal under the pathological pattern of modern criminology, but draft a midway, guided by the following question: in the cinema produced in early 21st century, could the queer criminal—at those times where its figure still insisted in making an appearance—be understood not only as a type who unveils the moral panic of societies of our time, but also that unveils an aesthetic

critique to assimilationist projects of organized movements, to essentialist strategies of positive representations and, also, as a provocation to mainstream queer studies that so far encouraged a teleological, positive and progressive episteme of divergent experiences in sex/gender?

At this point, it should be noted that queer studies, as an investigation field obliquely situated in the core of Gender Studies, must not be seen as a set of homogeneous theories aiming to study historical, discursive and cultural processes of normalization that divide society between normality and aberrant bodies and experiences, in special from sexuality as a conceptual operator by excellence. In fact, this field of study is diverse and its theories, as well as its researchers, have political divergences. In this article we will stand by, though provisionally, the side to what Lorenzo Bernini (2015) named as “antisocial perspective” of queer studies, strand which has bequeathed us a theoretical wealth with terms such as “death drive” (Leo Bersani, 1996; Lee Edelman, 2014), anti-communitarian ethics (Leo Bersani, 1996), “promise of happiness” (Sarah Ahmed, 2019), “queer utopia” (Steban Muñoz, 2018), “chrononormativity” (Elisabeth Freeman, 2010), “queer failure” (Jack Halberstam, 2020), “feeling backward” (Heather Love, 2007), among others.

With some caution when bringing them together so hastily, this group of theories and researchers seeks to think queer from the celebration of some negativity produced by experiences that are dissident from sex/gender normativities, not only under a celebratory aspect, but also a discerning and uncomfortable warning that, perhaps, we ought to raise doubts about liberationist, egalitarian and assimilationist projects that try to introduce and to tame unconventional and/or queer experiences to a social order that, under Foucauldian terms, do not differ from a sexual order. Hence, our attempt is to bridge the idea of queer criminality and this expanded lexicon from the negative perspective of queer studies, by exploring how this term is not about the criminal act in its actual materiality, but as an aesthetic resource that brings political pensiveness to certain works.

It should also be said that this set of antisocial theories is, as well as the theories which compose the so-called “affective turn of queer studies” (e.g. Eve Sedgwick), closer to studies on aesthetics and aesthetic experience than mainstream theories of queer studies (for which Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are the main reference and most disseminated across Brazil). These theories on negative and antisocial affections show us a wide range of theoretical and political contributions that have in artistic objects and processes their main investigation triggers, placing aesthetics, in its condition of an immeasurable field, to reflect on the political legibility of queer aesthetics which may provoke, under the terms of Jacques Rancière, a fracture in the policing of the sensitive.

Any distinction between these theoretical perspectives in the field of queer studies (antisocial theory, affective turn, critique to normalization processes) may be extremely arbitrary. Aware of that, we will not try either to explore these theories in films where criminal LGBT characters would commit easily justifiable crimes. We refer to, for example, works

from different cultural and geographic regions such as República dos assassinos (Miguel Faria Junior, Brazil, 1979), Law of desire (La Ley del Deseo, Pedro Almodóvar, Spain, 1987), Poison (Toddy Haynes, United States, 1991), The living end (Greg Araki, United States, 1992), Plata Quemada (Marcelo Piñero, Argentina, 2000), Madame Satã (Karim Ainouz, Brazil, 2002), Tangerine (Sean Baker, United States, 2016), Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, United States, 2017) and Great freedom (Sebastian Meise, Germany, 2021), where crimes committed, when not justified by the socioeconomic vulnerability of characters, are motivated by physical, symbolic, subjective and psychological violence promoted by gender normativities and sexuality. It is also not our interest at this point to analyze feature films such as El Angel (Luís Ortega, Argentina/Spain, 2019) or series such as Dahmer: The Milwaukee Cannibal (United States, 2022), where, albeit main characters fall perfectly under the category of psychopath queer whom Jeffery Dennis talks about in his research (and to be explored below), the works and the respective true histories that inspired them are about a list of crimes justified by psychopathy itself as a clinical and pathological category (i.e. are diegetically explained by a given condition).

Actually, we would rather find hedonist queen criminals, i.e. to search for films where crimes committed by characters have not only certain gratuitousness within the narrative, but also allow to identify, at some level, a pleasure in doing the criminal act itself. Furthermore, we would like to work with films that are less committed to promises of verisimilitude, as they seem to offer us greater freedom to explore these acts that are often unusual within the films themselves. The work that will be the subject of this theoretical effort is the film *Stranger by the lake* (*L'Inconnu du Lac*, 2013), directed by Alain Guiraudie.

With it, we intend to discuss some features of those criminals under a queer perspective, in special explore the hedonist, antisocial and death drive characteristics of those crimes in the film. Additionally, we will also seek to reflect on how queer criminality produces noises that may, in fact, rouse a homophobic discourse between those who try to restrain all that is queer or unconventional for the good of the future and order (Edelman, 2014), whereas such criminality also disturbs epistemes and social progressive movements, which, in many occasions, do not do much other than fight to spread this order.

2. Theoretical and methodological references

2.1. Criminal queer as social category: political abjection and twists

In his book *The Myth of the Queer Criminal* (2018), result of an extensive research in criminology, Jeffery Dennis is almost a Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy* (1472), especially when we remember the moment where the Italian writer narrates, accompanied by Virgil, what he saw in the Seventh Circle of Hell: a series of criminals such as murderers, suicidal, sod-

omites¹ and prostitutes burning in flames. Nevertheless, different from the medieval (and fictional) narrative where Dante Alighieri was writer and also character, Jeffery Dennis's narratology on queer criminals was limited to, in special, 19th and 20th centuries. That is, in his research, Dennis scrutinizes more than one century of writing by European and American sociologists, psychologists, criminologists and anthropologists and reports us how such professionals believed that homosexual people were innate and solely criminals, prone to burn in the flames of Dante's hell.

By using the method of narratology and the queer studies as theoretical groundwork, Dennis analyzes ten types of queer criminals that make an appearance in numberless seminal documents of modern criminology, from biosocial anthropologists in 19th century Italy who invented the pederasties to ethnographers who interviewed the "pansies"² in the decade of 1920 in Chicago; from Freudian psychoanalysts in 1930's France to 2010's criminologists who evoke the spectrum of "a small group of militant/criminal homosexuals" disturbing heterosexual passers-by. The author divides his book into ten chapters and each one is named after the traits assigned to the queer criminals at their time of birth, i.e. by means of scientific and criminological discourses that founded such identities: 1) pederasty criminal, considered a master in such activity; 2) the inverted, mainly concerned about seduction and ruin of future generations; 3) the degenerate, considered a cause or symptom of moral and social decadence; 4) the psychopath, whose dormant or open homosexuality is behind every criminal act; 5) pansies, term related to fagot, sissy, pussy, wuss, etc. and intended for designating flamboyant, effeminate, passionate, melancholic gay men; 6) innate traitor and murderer, in whom no one minimally ethical should trust; 7) juvenile delinquent; 8) the deviant; 9) the militant march for sexual anarchy; and 10) the erratic expelled and abandoned "prohibited fruits" in suburbs or surroundings of big cities.

For Jeffery Dennis, the European and North American criminology discourse in the last 140 years has turned queer criminals into myths. For that reason, a good portion of the analyzed documents could be read, according to the researcher, as histories with themes, plots, storytelling and characters:

Queer criminals are figures of myth. They have more in common with Hannibal Lecter than with car thieves, with Captain Hook than armed robbers, almost nothing whatever in common with the criminal offenders, LGBT or not, that one might encounter in everyday life. Since they are mythic beings, they can appear in fiction, poetry, and film as well as in scholarship, and their traits and motives can reflect not

1 Sodomy; word of biblical origin used to describe sinful sexual acts practiced by residents of the city of Sodom, i.e. practice of anal sex between man and another man or between a man and a woman. Besides that, during the Inquisition and, later, during the colonization of America, the word sodomite/sodomy also precedes the term homosexual, being spread as a synonym for homosexuality.

2 For better understanding of the idea of "pansy" homosexuals, we recommend the researches by Richard Dyer.

empirical reality but the fears and anxieties of their age, from the crisis of masculinity that followed from Italian Unification in the 1870s to the fear of Communist infiltration during the Cold War to the cowboy conservatism of the 1980s. (Dennis, 2018, viii)

Dennis also underscores that criminology of the nearly two last centuries has revolved around a narrative, a story that starts with innocents and ends with murderers, thieves, arsonists, drug addicts or forgotten, a narrative of fall and disgrace. For the same reason, the author uses the term criminologist in anachronic manner to refer to a group of experts³ who tried to associate criminal behavior with the desire for the same sex. In fact, stories that seek to connect criminal acts to homosexuality are not only mythical stories of modern criminology, but they may also be easily found in literature and cinema that have been produced throughout the 20th century.

As an example, it is interesting to recall *A personagem homossexual no cinema brasileiro* [The homosexual character in Brazilian cinema] (1995), important and pioneering work by researcher Antônio Nascimento Moreno, who mapped 125 films and analyzed 64 of them to discuss how Brazilian cinema, between the 1920's and the 1980's, has developed, made it explicit and helped to legitimate the filmic pejorative portrait of the homosexual population. The author concludes then that such filmic portraits would be negative and detrimental for an empirically vulnerable and discriminated population, a critique that in the 1990's already aligned to politics whose concern was to build positive representations of LGBT population. For that reason, researcher Francisco Lacerda Junior (2015) underscores that, when he wrote *A personagem homossexual no cinema brasileiro*, Moreno was in consonance with the egalitarian model of activism - very close to the American model of assimilationist lesbian and gay, defined by the gender of the desired object and following an eminently white, middle class, young, cisgender and monogamous standard – which was in process of dissemination through a combination of cultural effects and AIDS and cooptation of the activist movement by the market in the 1990's.

For Lacerda Junior, Moreno would have lost the chance of understanding how some representations he had considered negative could, *also*, be analyzed under the perspective of a queer who understood the deviation, the criminal act, the abjection, the monstrosity, the melancholy or the flamboyance as aesthetic and political gestures that would challenge the cultural engineering and sex/gender normative, which would affront sanitization politics,

3 Although Dennis limits to European and American context only to expose controversies of the criminological thought concerning homosexual populations, João Silvério Trevisan got to similar considerations when he wrote *Devassos no Paraíso: a homossexualidade no Brasil - da colônia à atualidade* [Debauchery in Paradise: homosexuality in Brazil - from colony to now](2017). In this extensive set of compositions, Trevisan also analyzed a series of documents (religious in particular) that criminalized the homosexuals (sodomites or pederasties at the time) because such mechanisms had already incorporated, through colonization, the different discursive apparatus of criminalization and punishment that had already been in effect in Europe.

biopolitical normalization tools and subjective cooptation of deviant individuals to suit the order of capital, sex, gender, race and social class. Nevertheless, following the hiatus of the 1980's and 1990's crisis, the retake, and especially post-retake of the Brazilian cinema, would make visible the change to representations of LGBT characters. With some exceptions, the most disseminated image was the "sanitized" or egalitarian model of homosexual persons (Lacerda Junior, 2015). Those images started to be in consonance – not only in Brazil – with new configurations of the organized and institutionalized LGBT activism, where combat strategies were much less interested in disrupting sex-gender order (Butler, 2011) or gap-resistance against biopolitical governmentality exercised by institutions such as the State, medicine, market, right or psychiatry.

On the contrary, the questioning of those social and sex-gender normative ontologies was almost entirely replaced with the engagement of a complex network of discourses across State institutions with purposes of recognition. As stated by Butler, such claims seek, and still seek, to minimize "life's hardships" (Butler, 2011) through the desire of being protected, accepted, noticed and intelligible under normative landmarks set out by cultural sex/gender ontology itself and under the terms of a gendered and sexed citizenship, as well as distance from the ghost of the deviant, misfitted, abject or criminal homosexual which the scientific research of Jeffery Dennis tells us.

Here in this paper, as we already pointed out in the introduction, we will use a different perspective. By recovering the figure of the criminal from an antisocial or negative perspective of queer studies, especially from Jack Halberstam, Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, we are interested in studying how the figure of the queer criminal produces an aesthetic and fictional noise that can, in fact, awaken a homophobic discourse among those who seek to repress what is queer, while such criminality also disturbs progressive social epistemes and movements that, on some occasions, do nothing more than just fight to expand this order. Initially controversial, this proposal is echoed in recent works on our own object of study, such as the research by Enda McCaffrey and Todd Resser.

However, unlike these researchers and their work, we are specifically interested in the sensitivity of the criminal act, and less interested in the becoming-animal inspired by a Deleuzian theory present in the film (according to the work of McCaffrey, 2016; 2019), just as we move away from a broader discussion of the film itself that is centered on the connections between space, place, temporality, capitalism, death and intergenerational same-sex relations (like the work of Todd Resser, 2022). Finally, we would like to point out that our methodology is not a conventional film analysis, which would seek to exhaust the filmic object frame by frame. We chose to produce an essay about the film, but especially about the figure of the queer criminal. In this way, we place theory and object of study in a horizontal position, assuming a critique that touches images and theories in order to build a joint reflection on the relationships between fiction, aesthetics and politics.

3. Results and discussion: *A stranger by the lake* and its aesthetic and political aspects

A still and remote lake, concealed somewhere in France, is visited by gay men as if they were on a nudist beach. They meet there to talk, swim, sunbathe and also to use the surrounding woods to have casual sex. The clean photography, with accentuated colors and lighting, enhances the oneiric and paradisiacal visuals (Images 1 to 4). Additionally, the diegetic sonority rendered by the sound of water, wind and rustling of tree branches shows the masterful work of sound mix that delivers a strong naturalist aesthetics.

Images 1, 2, 3 and 4. Main visual setting of the film and its atmosphere: lake landscape, naked male bodies, sex cruising and sexual acts at the lake surroundings





Source: Les Films du Worso, Films de Force Majeure, M141 Productions.

Franck, the protagonist, is a lake regular. And during that summer he meets Henri, a man quite older than other regulars and that claims to be there only for peace and tranquility, observing at a distance the casual sex of other men, but not without total disinterest in them. Firstly, the feature film explores the friendship between Henri and Franck, acclimating the viewer to recurring situations by the lake, even repeating, oftentimes, the same situations, as the arrival and departure of Franck in his car, him talking to Henri, flirting with other men, walking around the woods, sunbathing and swimming in the lake. That monotony of unproductive days is broken only when Franck meets Michel and becomes completely attracted to him.

Michel is the perfect image of a *homme fatal*, object of looks from all other men that hang out by the lake, even when such looks seem to be extremely discreet. The first times Franck sees Michel, the latter is accompanied by Pascal, a young man with whom the amorous object of Franck seems to have regular casual sex. Already attracted, or more precisely obsessed with Michel, Franck witnesses a murder in that oneiric environment. Hidden among the bushes barely lit by the sunset, Franck sees Michel drown Pascal in the lake (image 5). The homicide lasts just few minutes and, after making sure Pascal is dead, Michel returns to the lake shores. The murderer looks tired and breathless; he gets dressed and leaves,

believing that no one had seen that he had just murdered his lover. Nevertheless, when he gets in his car to leave, he notices that a car other than his was parked. We understand that, at that point, Michel suspects that some other lake regular could have seen what he had just done. It was Franck's car.

Image 5. Franck's point of view of the first murder committed by Michel



Source: Les Films du Worso, Films de Force Majeure, M141 Productions.

Despite knowing that Michel had murdered Pascal, Franck stops spending his time with Henri to become affectively and sexually involved with the killer, getting to the point of saying that he was in love for the man (image 6). Thereupon, the second act of the film renders a relatively more accelerated pace, and even the wind and rustling of tree branches get accentuated, helping to produce a heavier ambiance of apprehension and suspense taking over the place. After all, three days past the event, the body of Pascal is found and the police starts to investigate the case. Despite the suspense ambiance and suspicious that a homicide had occurred, all characters keep hanging out by the lake as if nothing had happened.

Image 6. Franck and Michel having sex after the crime



Source: Les Films du Worso, Films de Force Majeure, M141 Productions.

In view of the police inquiry, all points out to Michel and Franck. Regarding the former, the investigating officer truly suspects that it was Michel who murdered Pascal. Regarding Franck, the officer suspects that he was trying to cover up Michel's crime. Both are even interrogated at the same time and they notice the lies each one told the officer. Hence, witness and homicide become accomplices. Franck accepts it and craves for the risk. The fear of being the next victim is not enough to keep him away from Michel, even Henri's advices cannot dissuade him from the idea. Nearing the end of the feature film, we further see Michel murder other two men: the second is Henri himself, who unveiled to Michel that he knew Michel murdered Pascal. The third is the officer in charge of investigating the case. From afar, Franck sees again the two victims being murdered and, following a suffocating moment of despair, where he tries to run away from Michel midst the woods darkness, the final scene shows us a fragile and passionate Franck, lost in the penumbra of the woods, shouting Michel's name.

Some critiques read the film, but not without tracing moralist connections, as a fable about the dangers of casual sex, the dangers of sexual intercourse without protection and the loneliness of gay men. Others seek to reflect on the cinematographic genre and how the film disrupts some generic thriller conventions, in special related to male homosexuality. Nevertheless, what matters to us here is to question, and propose some answers on how the figure of the gay murderer in *Strange by the lake* leads to an oblique negotiation in an environment where both anonymity, loneliness, distancing of individuals and communitarian logics of gay men reign. And how, within the context of this fractured community space, the figure of Michel signals an antisocial sensibility (Bersani, 1996) and a death drive (Edelman, 2014) which, in addition to disturbing the lake oneirism, are located at the threshold that evokes moral panic of conservative groups when introducing to us, again, the queer criminal mythicized in his aspect of *homme fatal*, and also disturbs assimilationist projects and positive representations that became hegemonic in the field of arts and cinema, as well as in epistemes that insist in driving the queer to the field of reproductive and progressive futurism of the political struggle (Edelman, 2014; Halberstam, 2020).

As observed, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam are three authors with whom we would like to dialogue in a more particular manner to reflect on the "queerness" of criminals acts of Michel in *Stranger by the lake*, particularly when considering the way Bersani sees in queer studies an "apolitical mission" of embracing death drive and negative values of unproductivity, abjection and asociality. João Maracci and Daniel Kveller (2021, 135) stress that, since the 1980's, in the disturbing context of HIV epidemic, "Bersani criticized the emerging field of queer studies for its overly positive view of sexuality and sexual politics, in particular for his naive trust in promises underlying its emancipatory nature." The authors further point out: "For Bersani, such approaches ignore the fundamentally negative condition of sexuality, its resistance to any attempt at controlling, disciplining and positivizing, even those made on behalf of political goals so called 'progressive'" (Maracci, Kvelle, 2021, 135).

In fact, what Bersani's work suggests from a political standpoint is to nurture a certain suspicion regarding the stabilization of gay, transgender or lesbian identity, as this would be an inherently disciplinary project, nearly panoptic, where the successful immobilization of such identities has helped sexuality keep providing key categories to different forms of control and social regulation. Specifically the term identity, Bersani makes some acid comments on how assimilationist and liberationist activisms, albeit deeply conceived as acts of resistance to homophobic oppression, may easily be discredited as they only outline what would be "easily recognizable as white, middle class and liberal gay identity" (Bersani, 1996, 7), in addition to the upstanding, civilly well-behaved citizen, productive worker, father or mother and, besides that, an individual well-suited to heteronormativity.

By criticizing the term identity, Bersani directs his argument towards a gay specificity within a collective/identity sameness. In fact, more than that, Bersani encourages insight on gay specificity without contributing to a "gay groupality". Particularly the last chapter of book *Homos* (1998), entitled as *The Gay Outlam*, Bersani uses some works by Jean Genet (*Funeral Rites*, 1948 and *Song of love* itself), André Gide (*The immoralist*, 1902) and by Marcel Proust (*Sodom and Gomorrah*, 1921) to trace the clear contrast of those works and mainstream queer studies, as such books/films and authors used by Bersani would have been "drawn to the anticommunitarian impulses they discover in homosexual desire" (Bersani, 1996, 10).

In this set of analyzed texts, the researchers identify that what is intrinsic in "homosexual desire" could be a revolutionary ineptitude for sociability as we know it, or even the possibility of an extremely radical redefinition of the idea of community to the point of requiring provisional removal of the idea of relationality or sociability itself. Thus, through the work of Genet, Gide and Proust, Bersani invites us to celebrate what "what could be more repugnant to our own pride in a caring and supportive queer community than this brutal negation of communal impulses" (Bersani, 1998, 130).

We see in Michel, the murderer in *Stranger by the lake*, some of those eccentricities which Bersani comments. Michel unveils, before a voyeur viewer, as well as before Franck's eyes, an anti-communitarian ethics, or, at least, a broken negotiation with the community that he is part of. In fact, the character is inserted in that homosexual microcosm of casual sex and it is possible that he recognizes - as well as the other men that hang out by the site - a place safeguarded by gay sociability where they share some codes: sex is casual, condom is not necessarily required, to know the name of the partner matters even less important, and, away from the lake surroundings, they may pretend they do not know each other.

It could be said then that is about men who are completely socialized with each other. And, Michel, to the extent he allows us to see him as a sphinx-character, also knows that. Nonetheless, and even if it is possible to notice certain loneliness and distancing in other regulars/characters, which would allow us to question the extent of this group sharing, it is in the figure of Michel and his criminal acts that we see more clearly an anti-communitarian ethics. Michel does not talk, stays away, is an object of voyeurism and desire that is

reachable only by few and becomes the “outlaw” subject that Bersani talks about, not only because he breaches some heteronormativity laws, but also because he fractures the own communitarian logics of the gay microcosm to which he belongs.

It is interesting how Michel’s sexual preference for other men seem to not be enough to make him entirely part of that community; how his sexual preference is the own desiring *locus* to commit crimes against that same population/community. In different moments of the feature film it seems to us, in fact, that there is no psychic matter, no type of complex, no repressed conflicts, not even developmental or teleological explanations to understand the criminal acts of the character, making the murder of Pascal, for example, foreign in the narrative itself. What we know is that Michel’s existence unveils complex relationships between pleasure and risk, erotism and death and, perhaps, what Lee Edelman named as, inspired in Bersani himself, death drive (2014).

In spite of any similarity, Michel’s crime may be not about the defense of the gesture of taking the life of an individual, but how that gesture acts against certain prerogatives of life and order reproduction. We know that the violence still occurring against queer individuals must, in special, ensure what Lee Edelman (2014) calls reproductive futurism, i.e. the massively disseminated idea that dissident individuals and experiences “must” be attacked in an attempt to ensure a “better future.” Not rarely, this moral panic is accompanied by catchphrases such as “we should care for the future of our children” when, in reality, the concern, to Edelman, is only about reproduction and privileged maintenance of certain heterosexual order. Michel, therefore, represents danger. He hedonically acts against that order: in addition to being a criminal, he hangs out by a lake where he expects nothing beyond casual and unproductive sex in terms of human reproduction and that may, eventually, involve murderers. Furthermore, he refuses putting any effort into a “homonormative relationship” as suggested by Franck (dating, wedding, family formation) and his last two crimes have no other reason than saving his own skin.

Additionally, we believe that the strange and criminal persona of Michel is not only about moral panic that may be brought by conservative groups, because if they want to conserve (reproduce, keep) certain gendered and sexed order, Michel can also be a thorn in the image of the nice homosexual guy, those protagonists of a whiny and heroic white layer in the contemporary cinema, and also disturbs the hegemony of progressive movements of egalitarian, assimilationist and liberationist tendencies that seek to stretch the horizon of sex/gender order so that queer populations are accepted, protected, tamed, i.e. to reproduce the same fantasy of “a better future for our children”. Michael could then say “no to the future,” as it is entitled Edelman’s book (2014). His death drive puts him into an unproductivity and negativity position, maybe now an hedonist and criminal, where he neither stands by the conservatives taken by moral panic nor by those who put their faith in progressive struggles, in positive representations and socialization of the sameness (Bersani, 1996). In special, Michel seems to show us failure as a way of life.

Informed by some authors with whom we dialogued here, Halberstam (2020) points out to the existence of two types of “archives of feelings” which would be associated with the act of embracing failure as a political gesture triggered by queer individuals as a refusal of a moral teleology of respect to normative social models. To modulate those affections – all of them associated to the negative valency that has been explored in the article – brings some interesting impasses to think about a film such as *Stranger by the lake* and the ambiguities that also make it an interesting object of study. This archive of feelings includes, in a sphere, affections such as boredom, fatigue, annoyance or cynical distancing, which would be linked to a nearly parodic critique of heteronormativity, and, in others, affections more destructive-like, such as anger, disrespect, disappointment, incivility and impatience, which matter the most to Bersani. The defense of Halberstam, consonant with Bersani, is that the antisocial turning point in queer studies is only possible if we are open to “welcome a true political negativity, which this time promises to fail, mess up, fuck up, be exaggerated, rebellious and ill-tempered, generate resentment, talk back, speak up, disturb, murder, shock and annihilate” (Halberstam, 2020, 160-161).

And even if that seems to be the invitation of *Stranger by the lake* with the evil of Michel who kills “his counterparts” for no apparent reason, the aesthetic appeal of the film lies on the bucolic defamiliarization filled with light and beauty, either of the landscape itself or the male bodies that parade on the screen, recorded with certain *camp* sensitivity. Leaning less on the resource of artifice or exaggeration and never on the assumption of depoliticized or apolitical sensitivity, in the issue addressed here the *camp* touch of *Stranger by the lake* - as a “morality solvent” (Sontag, 2020) which neutralizes moral indignation and sponsors jocosity - seems to dialogue with the idea of victory of aesthetics over moral, irony over tragedy. The film does not mobilize either any insurrection against the murderer and his crimes and also seeks to place the viewer between the apathy and joy that are characteristic of the diegetic atmosphere.

Thus, if there is in fact any *camp* tessitura in *Stranger by the lake*, it does not seem necessarily to put a limit to negativity within the film, which really mobilizes the recognition of “failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique” (Halberstam, 2020, 133). But, for the fact that the film does not entirely abandon a normative combination of visual and erotic expectations that allows for its commodification, the *camp* signals the need to approach *Stranger by the lake* as a film that is situated at a threshold between aesthetic models of beauty and abjection. This means that, by recognizing some level of *camp* sensitivity, we also find the possibility of avoiding to place *Stranger by the lake* in favor of one or other regime, and to suggests that the work of Guiraudie dismantles the aesthetic logics itself that would place the filmic visuality of the feature film between beauty and abjection, approval and disapproval, morality and immorality, or even the aesthetic logics of failure and success, as Halberstam would say (2020).

In this game of hedonist criminality, *Stranger by the lake* aims at the negative purism itself of Bersani theory, notably more pessimist than later studies by Edelman and Halberstam,

whereas preserving a discerning aspect: if assimilation and positive preservation politics should not be taken seriously, anti-sociality and death drive grammars, when taken literally, may, in an inverse trap, essentialize and harden deviation, indiscipline and criminality gestures into a sterile and static disassociation purism, such affections that in *Stranger by the lake* seem to, in reality, make an ironic deal with the oneiric summer beauties and charming of a fatal man.

5. Conclusions

Our purpose in this article, which in some occasions may seem more of an essay devoid of methodological functionality, and which oscillates between cinematographic critique and theoretical investigation, was to seek the undetermined qualities of the criminality and the queer criminal. The appearances of the queer criminal, as we sought to explore through *Stranger by the lake*, are close to an antisocial lexicon of queer studies (Bernini, 2015), especially for dialoguing with sensitivities such as melancholy, failure, death drive and anti-communitarian ethics which disturb political projects, whether in the field of social activism, institutional politics, engaged art that converge towards the reproduction and expansion of sex/gender order, albeit their goals may be distinct in certain starting points.

Nevertheless - simply recognizing that the arts do not lend to domination or emancipation maneuvers more than what they can lend, and that the autonomy of those who can rejoice or the subversion they may attribute lie on the same basis (Rancière, 2009, 26) - we believe that queer criminality, as an aesthetic and political resource in the field of fictional art, has its own politics. This politicized is then like “the ordinary sunlight which provides light and shade in equal amounts” (Halberstam, 2020, 25), as it does not give in to art and image regimes that insist in exploring, in an hegemonic manner, pedagogic exercises of the engaged art, the Aristotelian narrative chaining, the positive representation and the essentialist representativeness of politically minority populations, but let live a queer and criminal character who escapes the moral chain.

Furthermore, and while the queer criminality found in the analyzed feature film may be quickly associated with the negative lexicon of queer studies, it also assesses a crafty unsuitability regarding that same lexicon, as it does not part away with certain commodifications that are noticed by *camp* sensitivity. Thus, the most interesting aspect to us in the queer criminal figure in *Stranger by the lake* is how these tense, obscure and bright aesthetic and political negotiations may, in the words of Rancière (2018), be less of a directive proposal of an explicit reference captured by an individual and delivered as a product of looking at another individual, and more of a “interim moment” that allows to work image in favor of a certain taste of freedom, even the freedom to be a criminal; not a fantasy of elsewhere, but a fissure explored in the aesthetic realm, sometimes taken by systems, forces and orders of the sensitive.

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